The roots of identity contingencies sociology essay

At the forefront of Steele's analysis is a stereotype threat, a particular kind of identity contingency. He speculates that stereotype threat embodies a standard human predicament, not as explicit as discrimination but powerful enough to constrain behavior simply by putting a threat in the air. It is a widespread phenomenon, truly universal, found in any given society, wherein any potential identity group can become subject to it. It can be applied to any situation to which stereotype is relevant. Thus, it follows members of the stereotyped group into these situations as a balloon over their heads (Steele, 5). Author asserts that it is hard to eradicate stereotype threats, though the pressure they impose on individuals can be eased. Allegedly, stereotype threat is an intrinsic part of human interrelations, a " tool" used by individuals, driven by a basic instinct of competition. Unlike discrimination in its gross forms, stereotype threats are, presumably, formed and nurtured subconsciously to benefit or confer privileges on to one social group, competing for opportunity and decent life, at the expense of the other groups.

Steele presents several experiments conducted to demonstrate how stereotype threat indirectly affects behavior and interferes with physical or intellectual performance. Experiments he refers to, namely the Michigan Athletic Aptitude Test and the one done at Princeton University, clearly show that the pressure stereotype threat poses is distracting enough to lead to individual's failure in particular task. In nutshell, the task in experiment measured the very trait, ability and skill the group was stereotyped as lacking. The very knowledge of the negative stereotype's relevance in the given situation made the assessed group fear that frustration on the task

could be misinterpreted and seen as confirming the stereotype. Hence, any deviation in performance, whether mental or physical, or a false move could cause an individual to be reduced to the stereotype and treated accordingly. Steele admits that it is a challenging task to prove that something abstract like stereotype threat can have a substantial effect on the individual's behavior. Nonetheless, the research and experiments he undertakes endorse his hypothesis of stereotype threat's detrimental effect on individual performance. His research focus raises a number of thought-provoking questions about the ways stereotypes affect our intellectual functioning, stress reactions, the tension that can exist between different groups and explores strategies that alleviate these effects and thereby help solve societal problems (Steele 13).

The aim of the research is to prove the importance of identity contingencies and of " understanding identity threat to personal and societal progress" (Steele 15). Steele comes up with several general patterns of findings. The first is that contingencies tied to social identities have their role in shaping individual lives. The second suggests that identity threats and the negative impact they have on our functioning contribute to society's most important social problems, thus undermining social integrity. Third is a general process by which stereotype threats interfere with a broad range of human functioning. Finally, they offer a set of feasible things, sort of solutions, which can alleviate effects of the identity threats.

The correlation between identity contingency and intellectual performance, in particular academic, preoccupies Steele throughout his research. He tries to shed light on the issue of academic underperformance of students from

underrepresented backgrounds. The problem he believes has repercussions at a nationwide level. He perceives it as a " core American struggle", wherein institutions try to integrate themselves racially, ethnically, class-wise (Steele, 17). In his attempt to reveal what factors account for persistent academic struggles of minority students Steele uses a concept know as " observer's – actor's perspective". Steele as a researcher is inclined to take the observer's stance, though looks at the problem from the latter's view. The actor's perspective emphasizes student's characteristics, his " intellectual luggage", aspirations, values, skills, expectations and so forth. He assets that the actor's perspective can be equally essential in explaining underperformance since the observer's perspective alone can not provide the full picture of the problem. His research appeals to E. Jones and R. Nisbett concept of the difference between those two perspectives. They argued that the observer's perspective is subject to bias because it stresses the things we can see, that is actor's traits and characteristics. But it deemphasizes things which fall out of the observer's literal and mental visual field, namely circumstances the actor responds to and the environment he has to adapt to. Steel believes that the actor's perspective can offer a plausible explanation of the link between identity contingency and intellectual performance. The feedback he receives from minority students supports his view. Students noted the university environment, wherein their social status was subtly accentuated, social life which was organized by race, ethnicity, social class, and rather racially homogeneous teaching staff and faculty. As a result, their social networks were organized by race. They were also puzzled by the fact that minority styles, interests and preferences were marginalized on campus (Steele 19).

Steele conducts an experiment to prove that academic achievement problem of minority students is not entirely due to skill and ability deficits. He contends that external factors and social and psychological aspects of academic experience can be powerful enough to directly or indirectly impair intellectual performance. Hence, the environment and status of a student can be an actual component of ability. Steele comes up with stigmatization idea. An idea that a devalued social status can cause underperformance. It is perceived as a plausible alternative explanation in contrast to an idea that underperformance of particular social or gender groups is rooted in some biological differences of those groups. Experiment aims to answer whether or not stigma impaired intellectual performance. If so, then what exactly does stigma do to people that affects intellectual performance? Are some groups more susceptible to the effect than others? What can be done to reduce it? It analyzes the gap between women's and men's grades in advanced math and English classes. The core of the experiment is to see whether results of the test taken under stigmatizing or potentially stigmatizing conditions substantially differ from results of test held under nonstigmatizing conditions. The striking finding of the experiment is that women, with equally strong math skills, did worse on a math test than men, though it was not the case in English test. Two conflicting explanations arise. The first, known as genetic explanation, finds the prerequisites for disparities in intellectual performance at the biological level. The other explanation was that frustration during the test makes societal stereotype of women's poor math capacity come to mind and be seen as relevant to them personally. The pressure not to confirm the cultural stereotype undermines the performance of women in that particular experiment. It is a " colar" of stigma which

comes into play, a factor which interferes with intellectual functioning (Steele 37).

What can be inferred from Steele's findings is that stigma pressure has negative effect on the intellectual performance. It diverts individual's mental resources from performance onto frustration.

Thus, performance can be dramatically improved by eliminating frustration and threat of stereotype confirmation. Nonetheless, Steele asserts, stereotype threats and stigma pressure can neither entirely explain these findings, nor have universal applications. The research done by Steele has important implications for higher education. Universities' policy on inclusion and diversity should incorporate an idea of identity contingency and raise awareness of stereotype threat in academic environment. There is no doubt in the quality and virtues of universities' policies on diversity and inclusion. The question is whether they are implemented effectively, whether universities de jure committed to diversity de facto foster an open and pluralistic academic environment.

He claims that social segregation and evident class divisions are a matter of fact at the university. More than half of the university' students are graduates of prestigious private schools such as Eton and Westminster. They represent political elite and aristocracy. 10 out of 17 United Kingdom's prime-ministers graduated from Oxford University over the last century. Allegedly, the whole academic process and social life is organized to serve the interest of the privileged class. He argues that the policy of diversity was gradually imposed onto the university. It had to allocate quotas for public

school graduates, overseas applicants an so forth because it was forced to respond to formalities of changing reality, a reality that was becoming progressively plural. The mission of the university, though, has undergone a little change. It reproduces political and business elite. No matter how hard he tried to impress privileged classes academically and in social life, imitating their manners, dress code, using Latin in his speech, his racial identity was seen as a barrier to social integration. Paradoxically, he became accepted into privileged circles when started selling crack to Blue Bloods. An intelligent Russian student with sophisticated manners did not fit English elite's stereotype of post-Soviet immigrant living in Birmingham. They needed to see a rude, unscrupulous guy using abusive language in Russian. They wanted him to confirm their stereotype and that they are right in identity assessments. He gave them what they needed, hoping to nurture acquaintance contacts among elites.

The fact that universities predominantly underestimate the importance of diversity and inclusion and treat stereotype threats as something abstract, thus not serious, is upsetting.